

Stephen Friedman Gallery

C Magazine
Sparkle's Map Home: Tau Lewis
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"I have landed in this place as a stranger. I have been formed from the refuse of the humanities," read one of the texts that accompanied Tau Lewis's exhibition *Sparkle's Map Home*. Through sculpture, Lewis approaches Black diasporic cosmologies. Her world-building is both intentional and refreshingly impenetrable, engaging a long history of radical Black feminist illegibility. In the work *Sparkle & Sparkle's map home*, Sparkle is seated in a chair facing a quilted map. Composed of a woven collection of textiles, assorted objects and found family photographs, the map offers no colonial signposts, directions or borders to situate home. Similarly, another sculpture titled *The Octonaut* features remnants of a globe; Lewis's sculptures work against the violent geographies that seek to understand and contain Black lives. Instead, as James Baldwin reminds us in *Giovanni's Room*, "home is not a place, but simply an irrevocable condition." Only Sparkle has access to this map of ancestral memory; it's uniquely theirs. Lewis's mythmaking imbues memory work with care, trading the colonial map's legibility for a path home that might feel "just right," for Black people—like listening to jazz or flipping through old family photographs ("because sometimes in life you need to listen extra hard for your lucky stars," Lewis writes in the accompanying text). If you know, you know.

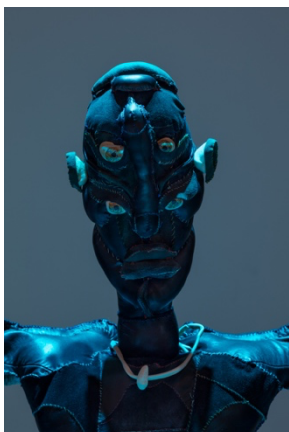


Image: Tau Lewis, 'Harmony', 2019. Recycled leather, recycled poly-fibers, rebar, wire, hardware, seashells, stones, acrylic paint; installation view from 'Sparkle's Map Home', 2020, Oakville Galleries. Photo: Laura Findlay; Courtesy of Oakville Galleries.

In Katherine McKittrick's "Keeping the Heartbreak," from *Don't Wear Down* (2019), she recalls a conversation with Lewis, along with certain details:

When Lewis and I met to discuss her visual art, she mentioned to me that part of her practice is to find something—a special object—and enclose it in the art, so it can no longer be seen. The intention is not to seek out and hide, from what I understand; rather in the process of putting things together, objects are lost or obscured from view. In line with much of [B]lack studies, the question of representation here is not only unfinished and momentary, it is comprised of things we cannot see or capture. Even though the monumental work of racism presents our lives and our art and our geographies as transparent, knowable, and always tied to oppression, there are some parts of blackness they just cannot have or imagine or grasp. In Lewis' work, the seen and the unseen and what we cannot know, speaks to the radical interdisciplinarity that, for me, defines all aspects of [B]lack life. The finding, gathering, and stitching together do not end in conclusion, but instead offer uncomfortable openings and wonder.

Many contemporary cultural institutions have a stake in discourses of representation, and stand to benefit materially from inclusion and diversity projects, with the condition that such representations of Blackness are made legible and digestible to the institution and its mostly white audiences. McKittrick's observations highlight precisely how those "things we cannot see or capture" offer us a generative Black elsewhere that is not beholden to the institutional or representational gaze: a Black elsewhere that simply is. And this engagement with the illegible is nothing new to Lewis. When I first encountered their work via the cyphers, tissue, blizzards, exile show at 8eleven in 2017—the same show that compelled McKittrick to write about Lewis—Lewis was engaged with similar themes of excavating memory beyond representation.

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The illegibility of Lewis's sculptures makes sense, given their sacred subject matter. Deeply personal, Lewis's origin stories are in communion with Black pasts, and ancestral memory, with each sculpture affectively charged with familial histories and ephemera. Not everyone is owed exegesis. Encountering the works in Sparkle's Map Home, I felt, at once, something as significant as the weight of Black diasporic histories, and something as particular as one individual's reckoning with them. As Lewis's accompanying text insists, in the ancestral register, "I came down to earth to let you know / your lucky stars were there all along.."

I'm especially compelled by sculptures of Thumper and Harmony, characters which recur throughout the show. In one room, they sit across from each other, with legs crossed. Each sculpture explodes with detail. I notice a flower painted on one of Thumper's toenails and almost immediately their floral earrings catch my eye, the motif from the toenails repeating itself. In Harmony, I find part of a globe that could have been repurposed in *The Octonaut*; there, I notice assorted trinkets and even rings. In another room, in I heard a heartbeat down in the blackhole, concentric circles of recycled leather form an intricate black hole. With each encounter, over time, I see the sculptures in a new way. You must sit with them; such care is necessary if we are to attend to the ancestral mythos as Lewis describes it—of "staring into the heaviest mightiest black."